EVEN AT THE UNLIKELIEST OF MOMENTS
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Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19
Luke 24:13-35

"Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him." Luke 24:31 (NRSV)

Open our eyes, O God, to truth hidden in the ordinary. Open our ears, so that in the midst of all the noise of our busy life, we might hear your word. And open our spirits, so we might recognize you in the common activities: the meals shared, the friendships enjoyed, the leisure time, this day and in the days of Easter ahead; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Among the truest words I know, the truth of which I have experienced are these . . .

> Sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are often everyday moments, the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears, reveal only . . . a garden, a stranger coming down the road behind us, a meal like any other meal. But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with our being and imagination . . . what we may see is Jesus himself. (*The Magnificent Defeat*, pp. 87-88)

Frederick Buechner wrote those words, and I have found them to be true. Ordinary moments are sometimes sacred moments. Sometimes we have to look with more than our eyes and listen with more than our ears. Sometimes there is more to knowing than understanding with your intellect.

Sometimes, unexpectedly, a sunrise, a symphony, the touch of a beloved's hand, the sound of a child's laughter, a meal shared becomes the means of grace, a sacrament, a promise that the holy is present, that the risen Christ is present.

Jesus had died. There was no doubt about that. And with him had died the hope and faith of his disciples, dear friends and family. The finality of his crucifixion had brought a devastating end to their growing sense that what he said was true, that he was the truth, that in his presence they were somehow in the presence of God. All of that ended when he died on a Friday afternoon.

A few of the women had returned from the place he had been buried, claiming that the tomb was empty, and a few of the twelve had claimed to see him. But for the most part, his friends were still experiencing the shock of what had happened and the grief that their friend was gone. And so two of them, later in the day of Easter Sunday, went for a walk.

What is so remarkable about this story is how ordinary it is. The two of them could be any of us. The road to Emmaus could be any road. Emmaus could be the common way you and I cope with loss and grief.

As they walk, talking about what had happened, the traumatic events of his betrayal and arrest, the horror of his crucifixion and his death, alone, between two thieves, near the city dump, they are joined by a stranger. Isn't it odd that they didn't recognize him? They continue to talk about what happened, explaining it to him. "Are you the only one in Jerusalem who doesn't know about it?" they ask him. And then, as the sun begins to set, they extend hospitality to the stranger, inviting him to share their evening meal and spend the night with them. It is when he broke the bread for them, in a way reminiscent of the time he fed the multitude, powerfully reminiscent of the way he had broken bread and shared it with his disciples on the night he was arrested—as he broke the bread, they recognized him. It was Jesus.

I love that story. The two relate the account of what happened to Jesus, including the resurrection, accurately but without much passion. It's as if they can't believe what their friends are telling them. They have information, but it hasn't made any difference to them. They have the facts, but there is no passion yet, no commitment, no brave devotion.

I love the story because I think that's the way a lot of us relate to Christian faith in general and Easter in particular. We know the words of Christianity but not the power and reality of it.

Craig Barnes, pastor of National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C.—and, some of you will remember, a former staff member of this church while he was finishing his Ph.D.—Craig wrote a fine Easter essay for the *Christian Century.* In his essay, Craig writes:

> The question that Easter asks of us is not "Do we believe in the doctrine of resurrection?" Frankly that's not particularly hard. . . . What the Gospels ask is not, "Do you believe" but "Have you encountered a risen Christ?" . . . No one is ever ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in the dark place where hope cannot be seen." ("Savior at Large," *Christian Century,* 13 March, 2002)

I love the fact that in this story the risen Christ comes to two men in the midst of an ordinary, very human activity: taking a walk, dealing with a terrible loss. They weren't looking for him. They didn't even recognize him. Faith, this story suggests, does not come as a result of our intellectual search or struggle with ideas. Faith is not a product of studying theology, memorizing scripture, reciting creeds. Faith is not even produced much by churchgoing. Faith is a gift. Faith is what happens when, by God's good grace, a risen Christ confronts us in the middle of life and an ordinary experience becomes a sacred experience, an ordinary moment becomes a holy moment, and a truth deeper and more profound than what our minds can understand becomes momentarily clear.

The two must make a decision now: to trust this new reality, this amazing possibility, or to continue what they were doing, to proceed with their journey. They decide to trust. They turn around and go back to Jerusalem, and although they are never heard from again, you know they join the twelve and tell them, as best they can, about what happened to them, and they set out to live their lives, their brand new lives, in light of this new reality. They decide.

Barbara Brown Taylor says the resurrection of Jesus Christ permanently rearranges our understanding of reality. Before this experience, before any experience of the risen Christ,

they—we—try to squeeze what we are told happened on Easter morning into our understanding of the world and how things work in the world. Afterward, it's the other way around. How we understand the world has to fit into the reality of a love more powerful than death, of a love that conquers all, even the power of death itself. And that's a decision you and I must make, a basic, fundamental decision about how we will live our lives. Knowing about the risen Christ, we will never give up our dreams or the causes we believe in and that matter to the life of the world. "There is no wreckage so total, no cause so lost," Taylor writes, that the living Christ cannot redeem it.

Sometimes it isn't easy to see. In the days before the Civil Rights movement, the hope for racial justice and equal opportunity seemed remote, naive even. Well, we aren't home yet, but we have come a long way. Heavy in the air and in our hearts this morning is the dreadful conflict in Israel and Palestine—the incredible suffering of the Palestinian people and the raw terror of the Israeli people and the seemingly out-of-control military escalation by Israel, unresponsive to the pleas of the world, including our own president. But even that cause is not lost, and people who know about the power of love to overcome death will continue to hope and pray and work and write letter to politicians to the end of a just peace, a secure peace for Palestine and Israel.

Thinking of them, Taylor writes:

> Deciding to trust the contours of this new reality . . . the friends themselves are changed. They stop hiding and start seeking. They stop making excuses and start moving mountains. . . . They lay their hands on the sick. They defy the authorities. They never tire of telling people who gave them the courage to do such things, and they become known for their glad and generous hearts. (*Journal for Preachers,* Easter 2002)

After looking at this story from every conceivable angle, I conclude that the only thing they do to contribute to this resurrection experience is to remember hospitality. And I conclude that extending hospitality is perhaps what Jesus Christ wants most from his church. And that he promises to be present and alive in his church as it remembers to extend hospitality in his name to those who need it most—to the stranger, whoever that may be and who he once was. I conclude that he cares a lot more about welcoming the unwelcome than he does about excluding the unacceptable.

So far as I can see, inviting him to stay for dinner is the only thing these two did right—and it was enough. As so, I conclude that while the grandeur of this worship hour is surely an important part of who this church is, an equally important and possibly more important part will happen later this afternoon, as the sun is setting and a hundred or so hungry, homeless men and women start to gather for the Sunday Night Supper.

I love this story because it is about the healing of grief and the reappearance of hope in the middle of devastating loss. Frederick Buechner, who will preach two weeks from today, has written a fine new book about four writers who have influenced him and how they dealt with darkness and loss in their lives: the Jesuit poet Gerard Manly Hopkins, G. K. Chesterton, Mark Twain, and William Shakespeare— particularly King Lear, about which Buechner has written all his life. It's entitled *Speak What You Feel.* Buechner, now in his 70s, counts his losses—of

friends, his only brother, his own youth, and he writes, "There is sadness too in thinking how much more I might have done with my life."

Buechner has given much to many people, so it is particularly poignant when he writes, "I wish such faith as I have had been brighter and gladder. I wish I had done more with it. I wish I had been braver and bolder" (p. 160).

What he learned, he says, from his four writers is, "Take heart, even at the unlikeliest moments" (*Speak What We Feel (Not What We Ought to Say)*, pp. 159-161).

There was, I suppose, no more unlikely moment than that humble meal, at the end of the day, on the road to Emmaus. And you and I are invited to expect God to find us—not just in church but in the ordinary, unlikely moments and experiences that make up our lives, even the sad moments, the moments of loss and grief, particularly in the moments the risen Christ is present with a love more powerful than death.

In his wonderful book *Open Secrets*, Richard Lischer, professor at Duke Divinity School, tells about his experiences as a newly ordained Lutheran pastor in southern Illinois, including Buster Toland's funeral. Buster was a mechanic at the local garage. His wife, Beulah, drank too much and was high on drugs most of the time. They argued loudly and profanely and bitterly and in the middle of a huge shouting match when he came home from lunch—and there was no lunch—Buster dropped dead. "Dead before he hit the floor," Beulah said, at least a hundred times to anyone who would listen. Buster was a rascal, and his death made the whole community feel apprehensive and worried about his utterly dysfunctional family.

Lischer helped Beulah through the local funeral plans and negotiations with the funeral director, which were very difficult. Beulah kept insisting on the most expensive casket and arrangements because she "owed it to Buster," she said. The idealistic young minister managed to alienate the funeral director and infuriate his Board of Trustees in the process. Finally the day for the funeral arrived, complete with the open casket in the narthex of the church. The service itself was a disaster. Beulah wailed at the top of her lungs through the service and Lischer's sermon. He concluded quickly by reminding the congregation that Buster had been a good Marine and father and now the church would assume greater responsibility for his family.

And then the congregation moved to the little cemetery on the hill behind the church. The casket was lowered into the grave. Lischer said the words of committal and it was over, and the military phase was about to begin. Four uniformed veterans from the local VFW formed an honor guard and fired their rifles on command three times over the heads of the congregation. There was even a bugler for the occasion, twelve-year-old Moriah Seamanns, standing halfway up the hill in a pink jumper with a thin white sweater draped over her shoulders. Her new coronet caught the sunlight and she was about to give the performance of her life. Her mother stood beside her to hold her music and to steady her child, like a doe and a fawn in the silence of the spring afternoon.

Then Moriah began to play. She did not play "Taps." She played four stanzas of "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth," arcing each note across the ravine toward the mourners on the hill. It

was, Lischer says, "as if her music were a time-delayed message coming to us from a saner and more beautiful world."

Standing in the lumpy mud of the cemetery, Lischer said he "could see Easter" (*Open Secrets: A Journey through a Country Church*, pp. 180-196).

> The ordinary become holy.
> Everyday experiences become sacred.
> At the unlikeliest of moments, the
> Risen Christ appears.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Prayers of the People
By Thomas C. Rook, Parish Associate

Lord Jesus Christ, once crucified, dead, and buried, but now living and ruling and loving, show yourself to us in our lives today. O Savior Christ, as you made yourself known to your disciples in the breaking of bread, so open the eyes of our hearts that in faith we may sense your presence in our best thoughts, in our best actions on behalf of others. O Lord, help us to see with your eyes. Help us to listen with your ears. Help us to think about what we are doing in our world. Inspire us not to falter nor to make empty plans, but to join in your great plan of sharing your love and grace.

This day there is no heart here but is burdened and cast in shadow by the unfolding tragedies in what we call your Holy Land, O Lord. Years and generations of warfare leave us perplexed as to the conflicting rights of Israelis and Palestinians. It seems beyond our human wisdom to weight the justice and injustice, the wrongs given and received, by people fearful and angry and despairing of hope. Even now, as Secretary Powell meets with leaders on both sides, grant him and them, O Lord, some light of your Spirit, of insight and courage to find a path that we cannot divide, a path toward peace and justice. And open our eyes to see your own face in the despairing faces of children and mothers and fathers in that place. Hasten the day when "they shall not hurt or destroy on your holy mountain, when no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it or the sound of distress."

We confess that hostility and foreboding is not confined to conflicting nations and armies, but darkness also comes within our own lives. A child experiences disrespect and maltreatment within her own home; a son waits in vain for his father's blessing. A student is excluded from friendship by classmates, and another goes fearfully to and from school each day. A young woman and a middle-aged man have worked faithfully and well in their jobs and are now notified of dismissal. And someone this day is awaiting results of medical tests or impending medical procedures, and their spirit is clouded in fear of the outcome.

And so, Lord Jesus, we too hunger for your presence in our lives. We need to feel your strong hand holding ours. We need desperately to trust and to know that we are finally not alone but that you walk beside us, will never leave us, and that you promise, in life, in death, that we are yours and can never fall out of your love. Lord, remember us, each one of us here today. Give us the grace to cast all our cares on you, knowing that you care for us.

In that hope and faith, using words the Lord Jesus taught his followers to pray, we now say in one voice, Our Father . . .